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Behind the mask

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Behind the mask

It was finally time to rest. The morning breeze filled the cave as Lexandre took a deep breath. Still scarred by the agony of the mutations, he gently lowered his mask and touched his face. The dry, leathery skin sent a wave of revulsion through the witcher's fingers, as if he were touching burnt meat. He looked down at his chest, seeing the medallion that flooded his mind with memories of the life he had before deciding to act on his dream. The caravan, the assassination of the Grandmaster, stealing the diagrams... Even for a witcher, the guilt was almost too heavy to bear.

"There's no turning back," the witcher thought. *"But it was worth it."*

He hid the diagrams in his satchel and left the cave. Stepping out into the light, he saw Beauclair Palace gleaming in the far distance, reminding him of the reason he had fled to the other end of the world: to gather enough coin for the peaceful life he had craved for so long. His mother would be proud...

Upon reaching the capital, he couldn't afford to be distracted from his sole objective. He climbed what seemed like an endless flight of stairs leading toward the palace until he spotted a sign. *"The Ducal Armorer"* was scratched into the wood. Lexandre took another deep breath and stepped inside.

He was greeted by a bulky, shady man scribbling on a piece of parchment with a quill. The moment the armorer noticed his unexpected guest, he hastily hid the document. The air grew thick with tension; neither man dared to speak, each waiting for the other to make the first move. De Launay—for that was the armorer's name—stared coldly at the stranger.

"Great... another mutant," De Launay muttered.

Lexandre was used to the harsh hostility of common folk, yet the phrasing caught him off guard. "Another?" he echoed.

The egotistical, corrupt armorer sneered. "Yes. Already saw one of your kind. He searched the entire Duchy looking for another witcher."

Lexandre froze. He was already being hunted. There was no time to waste; he had to act fast. "I have something that might interest you. Diagrams. From a more... civilized time," the mutant said.

De Launay couldn't help but feel intrigued by what this vagabond had to offer. Lexandre explained everything he knew about the armor and offered his expertise to help reverse-engineer it—in exchange for a small fortune. The armorer eyed him suspiciously, yet agreed. Another month without progress, and Her Majesty would replace him. And if someone else took his post, Anna Henrietta would inevitably uncover the shady dealings De Launay had been conducting behind her back.

Lexandre felt a wave of relief; his miserable life on the Path was finally coming to an end. However, the armorer had one condition. Arthach Palace. The ruined fortress where the infamous Antoine Straggen's hanse had taken shelter. De Launay deemed the witcher too untrustworthy to deal with alone, so he planned to strike a bargain with Straggen's men for protection in case the mutant tried to double-cross him. The masked man had no choice but to accept. It was now or never. Having sealed the deal, he headed back toward his cave.

On the path back to his shelter, a sudden crossbow bolt slammed into the dirt right at his feet. A shot like that couldn't have missed by accident—it was a warning. Lexandre spun around to face his attacker. It was Joël.

"One more step, and I'll kill you," the young witcher warned.

"You'd do that to your own brother? Isn't that what Gaetan taught you? To treat every witcher as family?" Lexandre whispered, his gaze locked onto the younger man.

"Don't you dare speak his name! He may have taught me brotherhood... but he also taught me how to use my sword. And for a monster like you, I'll use silver. A blade to finish you off and bring justice to the souls YOU murdered. Guxart, Axel, Cedric, Gwidon... All dead because of you!" Joël gripped his hilt, preparing to lunge.

"Do you want to know the truth about your precious 'brotherhood'?" Lexandre whispered, reaching up to pull off his mask.

The witcher's face was a nightmare. Where his nose and mouth should have been, down to his neck, there was only raw, red flesh—burned and seemingly rotting alive, a gruesome monument to the Cat School's twisted experiments. His ruined jaw hung loosely, swaying as if ready to detach. Joël stared in horror, unable to utter a single word.

"What's wrong? At a loss for words? I expected more. I'm hurt," Lexandre mocked bitterly.

Joël remained frozen in silence. Lexandre let out a hollow groan. "How long did it take you to realize I never wanted any of this? Less than a month? A week? Or did you never care at all while they butchered me in that damned caravan?" The young man just stared. "YOU DID THIS TO ME!" Lexandre roared, slamming the mask back over his face.

Looking at the broken, tortured shell of a man before him, Joël's fury gave way to grim resignation. He simply demanded the medallion to prove Lexandre's death to their remaining brethren. Without a word, Lexandre unclasped it and handed it over. Joël lingered for a brief second, staring at his former brother, before turning and walking away.

The next day, Lexandre relocated the bulk of the diagrams to the Pits of Brume. He met De Launay near the ruined courtyard of Arthach Palace as planned, unaware that the armorer's "insurance policy" had already turned against them. They were squarely in the crosshairs of Antoine Straggen's cutthroats.

"Where are the rest of the diagrams?" the royal armorer demanded impatiently, glancing nervously at the shadows where his hired thugs were supposed to be hiding.

"The Pits of Brume. It's a dangerous place. I can lead you there—for an extra fee."

The moment the words left his lips, warm blood splattered across Lexandre's face. A crossbow bolt—loosed by one of Straggen's own men—had impaled De Launay straight through the throat. The armorer collapsed onto Lexandre, gurgling on his own blood, his heavy coin purse spilling onto the cobblestones with a loud metallic clatter before he went limp.

Another bolt whistled through the air, striking the witcher. Without his medallion

to warn him of the looming danger, Lexandre's reflexes failed him, and he couldn't cast the Quen sign in time. Another bolt followed, and then another, burying themselves deep into his chest. Thankfully, the mutations dulled the agony—he didn't feel an ounce of pain—yet his body went numb, paralyzing him on the spot. Straggen's bandits emerged from the ruins, cheering greedily as they grabbed both the dead armorer and the immobilized witcher, dragging them away toward their camp.

The next thing Lexandre knew, cold rain was pelting his face, waking him from what felt like a deep slumber. A bandit stood over him, grinning.

"Put too much stock in your witcher skills, huh?" the brigand sneered.

Lexandre tried to move, only to realize he was tightly bound with thick ropes.

"Let's see how much pain you can really stomach," the bandit said, drawing a jagged knife. He plunged the blade straight into Lexandre's chest.

The witcher didn't even flinch or groan. Yet one thought echoed clearly in his mind: he had made a fatal mistake trusting the armorer. Not that De Launay had fared any better—the man's corpse lay nearby, his pockets turned inside out. Everything began to slow down. The rotten deal, the betrayal of his brothers, the theft... all of it blurred together into a painful, endless loop inside his head.

The bandits' attention soon shifted to Lexandre's mask. One of them yanked it off, revealing the grotesque monstrosity hidden beneath.

"GODS!" the brigands screamed in terror, stumbling back.

Lexandre stared at their horrified faces and began to laugh. A quiet chuckle quickly escalated into manic, hysterical laughter as his fractured mind looped the same memories over and over. Terrified by the madman's cackling, one of the panicking bandits lunged forward and drove a knife into his throat.

Breathing became nearly impossible, dark spots clouding his vision, yet a strange peace washed over him. *"It was worth it,"* he thought as the world faded to black. *"Worth killing my friends, worth stealing the diagrams that cost Guxart's life, worth everything... Just to escape this miserable life on the Path..."*

A day later, the bandits dragged Lexandre's corpse into a clearing. Hoping to cleanse their camp of evil spirits, they set the deceased witcher's body ablaze. Once the fire finally died out, they dumped his charred remains beneath an old stone arch.

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